

# INNOVATIONS & PERSPECTIVES

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY TRAINING & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER (VCU T/TAC)

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## The Surry Elementary Experience

**Geraldine Bailey**  
Instructional Support Teacher,  
Surry Elementary School  
**Dr. JoeAnn Newby**  
Principal,  
Surry Elementary School

Early intervention is the key to school success! With this in mind, our principal, Dr. JoeAnn Newby welcomed an innovative initiative by allowing our school to serve as a pilot Instructional Support Team (IST) site for the Virginia Department of Education. Our instructional support team, comprised of the principal, an instructional support teacher (Geraldine Bailey), a special educator (Catherine Bowden), two general educators (Mae Mason and Barbara Arrington), and the school psychologist (Bruce Spital), attended numerous training sessions in order to learn how to implement the IST model. Ed Gickling and Todd Gravois, facilitators for the IST model, provided many opportunities for our team to acquire and demonstrate skills in the problem solving process. The experience was phenomenal!

As we learned about IST, the facilitators came on-site and modeled classroom strategies on several occasions. The teachers and students were very excited by the enthusiastic manner in which the facilitators presented failure prevention strategies for children.

The IST concept was further introduced during grade-level meetings and via an IST brochure and newsletter which were distributed to faculty and staff. Using a power point presentation, the instructional support teacher explained the IST model during a School Board meeting and a PTA meeting for parents, staff, and citizens from the community. Our T/TAC partners also helped make instructional support the "preferred" instructional strategy at our school.

The **instructional support** process is based on the concept that teachers need assistance in meeting the increasingly complex academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs of their students. The IST serves as a bridge between special and general education programs. Through the collaborative, problem-solving process, the team helps the classroom teacher to identify the student's specific school difficulty, set measurable goals, and develop effective instructional strategies.

So why is instructional support necessary? Students in general education classrooms sometimes display learning difficulties, although they may not receive supportive services such as Title I or special education. These students may have problems reading text, participating

in class discussions, organizing information, working independently, completing in-class assignments, locating and sequencing information, communicating through written expression, and completing homework assignments. In spite of these difficulties, these students can make progress in general education environments through adaptations in instruction and assessment.

IST works with students at their instructional levels rather than their grade-level placements. Intervention occurs at the initial stage: when a student struggles in school. The IST process helps general education classroom teachers assess what children know and then how to plan and connect new information to children's prior knowledge based on their performance on the assessment. This is the essence of accurate assessment and effective instruction. If students are instructed beyond their level of readiness, stress builds up and learning diminishes. When students feel successful, they are able to maintain their interest and excitement for learning.

In my role as the instructional support teacher at Surry Elementary School, I draw on the expertise that is evident among the instructional support team, faculty, and staff. One of the most attractive pieces of an IST is the degree of collaboration and problem solving that is exhibited within the school building. With the IST initiative, a student's learning problems are not viewed as a deficit in the student, but as a mismatch between the student's entry skills and the instructional setting.

Recently, when asked to think of an adjective that best describes the IST initiative, I responded by saying "marketable". As time goes on, I think more and more school systems will capitalize on instructional support because it will improve collaboration and problem solving within the school building. I give credit to the administration at Surry Elementary School for having the foresight to take steps in initiating team building and encouraging teachers to involve the children in cooperative learning activities. No teacher or student is an island. Teachers and students learn more when they collaborate. Good ideas and strategies are worth sharing!

When working with children, a poem that I learned while working on my B.S. degree in early childhood education remains in my heart. This poem is printed below and it shares the IST concept because in order to teach a child successfully, one must know the child's prior knowledge. (This poem is to be shared with students by the teacher).

*I'm here to teach you,  
And help you grow.  
But the hardest thing I need to learn,  
Is what you need to know!*

At Surry Elementary School, we stand behind the slogan for our IST newsletter, which says: "IMPROVEMENT: ONE SUCCESS AT A TIME!"